

English Education and Proficiency in Japan

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Introduction to English in Japan

In Japan, English is a major subject of study for junior high and high school students. In some cases, other foreign languages may be offered, but most, if not all, choose to study English. Japanese students complete nine years of compulsory education, during which English is taught for three years in junior high school. If they decide to further their education and continue into high school, they take another three years of English classes. This amounts to six years of mandatory English education (Li & Lee, 2005). However, despite having years of formal instruction, if not most, many Japanese people cannot speak proficiently at a level that is to be expected after such an education. Many Japanese people cannot speak English at all, much less hold a simple conversation. This gap between the amount of study and their actual English ability is due to many reasons. These reasons can range from the way the English teaching program is set up, the student's lack of motivation to learn for reasons other than to pass an entrance exam, the lack of confidence to speak English aloud, to the upholding of the belief that Japanese people cannot learn foreign languages. However, the central reason that keeps surfacing as an explanation for the low English speaking proficiency level of the Japanese people is the lack of oral communication practice in the classroom.

Japan's TOEFL Scores

The current status of English in Japan can be described by analyzing the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores. According to Gottlieb (2005), Japan continuously scores low on the TOEFL. In 1998, Japan's average score ranked them 180th out of 189 United Nation countries that participated. In 1999, they ranked the lowest among 25 Asian countries with a score of 498 out of a total of 677. A year later they rose to 18th out of 21 Asian countries

with an average score of 501. However, China's score was 543, and South Korea's was 535, which are considerably higher in comparison (Noriguchi, 2007). The 2001-2002 results and summary of the TOEFL scores list Japan as 29th out of 30 nations based on their computer-based test performance and 14th out of 15 based on their paper-based test performance (Gottlieb, 2005). In 2004-2005, once again Japan ranked second to last in Asia with a score of 191 points, which was only one point higher than North Korea, while Singapore placed highest with a score of 254 (Fukada, 2010). From these results, one can conclude that at least from the evaluation perspective of the TOEFL test, Japanese people do not seem to have a very good grasp of English comparatively to other countries. On top of all this, Japan's low overall scoring on the TOEFL seems to be a steady trend that has been continuing for at least the past couple of decades, without note of much improvement.

Nihonjinron

Many studies have been done to explain what these results imply. One explanation dates back to postwar period Japan. This is the Nihonjinron view of the Japanese language, which claims that Japanese is linguistically homogeneous, which basically means that because Japanese is so different from any other language, the people of Japan cannot learn foreign languages (Gottlieb, 2005). Nihonjinron could in fact be a factor in explaining why Japanese people cannot speak English. However, other explanations like the inability of the English teachers to speak English (Amaki, 2008) and the students' view of English as a function to pass life-determining exams rather than a means of communication (Ryan, 2009) all point to one central problem with the English education system in Japan, and that is the lack of oral practice and emphasis on communication in the classroom.

English Education from the ALT Perspective

This issue is presented in various studies. One study done by Amaki (2008) looks into the issue of poor English ability among teachers from the point of view of the foreign Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) involved in the public school system. One point of interest is that because many times the level of oral English proficiency among the English teaching staff is very low, they tend to rely heavily on using Japanese during an English lesson. This detracts from the students' need to develop their speaking and listening skills. Amaki surveyed 282 current and former ALTs who have taught in the 47 prefectures of Japan in regards to their overall assessment of the English language education in the schools they have taught and how well-prepared and organized the class presentations of the staff English teachers were. The data shows that the oral proficiency among the English teaching staff was low and that many of them did not have confidence to speak in their classrooms. Comments from the ALTs reflect there was a lack of originality in the English lessons, and the more traditional teachers favored teaching rote grammar memorization and sentence deconstruction. The results also showed that 47% of ALTs expressed the negativity of the absence of oral communication in the classrooms. One pointed out that "[t]he students do not have chances to speak English during class or use English in a practical way to express themselves" (Amaki, 2008, p. 40). Another ALT points out that English appears to be taught like a science subject instead of an actual language for the purpose of communication. It seems that the listening and writing aspects of English are main focuses of English education in Japan, and as one ALT notes, "...English is being taught as a 'passive' language" (Amaki, 2008, p. 40). Apparently, oral communication is not stressed, but rather the skills necessary to pass a written examination is prioritized. This type of teaching

produces thousands of students who graduate from Japan's public schools not knowing how to hold a conversation in English and only knowing how to answer questions on a test.

Grammar as a Priority

In another study, Ednie-Lockett (2012) interviewed teachers and students about motivation, usage of ALTs, university entrance exams, and pair/group conversation practice. The results show that there is a lack of oral practice in the classrooms and that Japanese people tend not to like to speak English. Students expressed that they do not speak much in class, despite possibly having opportunities for pair or group work. This is due to the fact that they have a strong belief that Japanese people cannot speak to other Japanese people in English; they simply have a hard time doing so. A native English-speaking teacher pointed out that the classes are very teacher-fronted, and the students might have only about five minutes to produce the language. Japanese people tend to think that grammar should be taught first and foremost, which leaves conversation skills behind due to the lack of time, and their priorities are clearly visible when the interviewees express that there is no necessity for English speaking tests. The fact that the students do not speak to each other in class and value grammar above anything else explains why Japanese people cannot speak English after years of study.

High School English from the Perspective of University Students

These values are explicitly reflected in Japan's high schools, which emphasize reading comprehension and grammar-translation rather than listening and speaking skills (Sergeant, 2009). This is evident in a case study conducted by Taguchi and Naganuma (2006), who interviewed students in an English-medium university about how the problems of English high

school education affected their further learning. Six out of the thirteen students expressed that their high school English classes were taught in Japanese, so they rarely had any opportunity to listen to English. Many expressed that when they first entered the university, they could not understand anything because they did not have any prior aural practice. Eight out of the thirteen students said that they experienced great difficulty in speaking English upon entering the university because they had near to no experience in speaking English in their high school classes. They did not have any conversation practice or spend much time learning daily expressions, but rather they only read aloud sentences, meaning that they never produced the language. The students also expressed their difficulties with reading and writing as a result of their inadequate lessons in high school. They were taught to read sentence by sentence and translate accurately rather than read for comprehension, and they barely had any writing experience. Japanese people graduate from high school without much communicative competence due to the absence of communicative practice in schools. The result is not only low proficiency after years of study, but their endeavors into higher education suffer as well.

Teaching Practices, Historically Founded

The lack of oral communication practice in classrooms appears to be deeply rooted in the Japanese society. A study done by Browne and Wada (1998) shows that the most important influences on classroom teaching include teaching the contents of the textbook and preparing the students for the university entrance examination (Wada, 2002). History plays a huge part in determining the role of English in Japanese society (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). Japan's isolation from English-speaking people was a time when English was only necessary to translate

and study Western works and oral proficiency was not considered important (Seargeant, 2009). What the Japanese people find valuable in learning English has not changed since this time.

Literature Summary and Comparison to Korea

With priorities that have not changed much since the last century, Japan continues to implement teaching practices in the classroom that focus on grammar-translation and reading comprehension. The oral communicative aspect of the English language continues to be neglected. This is the main reason why Japanese people cannot speak English after six years of formal instruction. On the other hand, South Korea, who has outperformed Japan on the TOEFL, recognizes the importance of more practical English ability. Speaking and reading sections will be added to formerly purely receptive university entrance exams by 2015 in South Korea (Inagaki, 2012). English appears to be valued more as a means of communication. Until Japan reprioritizes and reforms their education system too, the Japanese people might very well continue to perform poorly on the TOEFL for years to come, and more importantly, waste years of schooling only to graduate without communicative English ability.

Background of Study and Procedure

After an in-depth literature review that led me to conclude that the lack of communication practice in schools is a major reason why Japanese people cannot speak English very well, I decided to see if I could find further evidence for this claim. I was also interested in how Japanese people view the English ability of the people of their country. I surveyed 11 undergraduate and graduate students from my various Second Language Studies classes at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Of the 11 participants, whose ages ranged from 20 years old to

middle aged, two were Korean natives—one male, one female—and the remaining nine were Japanese natives—two males, seven females. The two surveys completed by the Korean natives serve to either provide contrast to the English education in Japan and Korea or comparable situations.

The survey (Appendix A) consisted of six questions which were composed of several parts. The first question gathered background information on how long they have been studying English and how long they have been living abroad. The next question addressed their English schooling in their home country and if taking English classes were mandatory. The third question asked the participants to describe their English education in school in terms of a typical lesson, activities, textbook, etc. The fourth question and its subsequent parts were meant to distinguish between how the four areas of language—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—were taught in school by addressing extent of emphasis, which area the participant has more confidence in, and which they value most. The fifth question was written with the knowledge that the participants are proficient enough in speaking and listening to enroll in classes taught only in English, and asked how they improved said skills. The final question was meant only for the Japanese natives and is as follows: Do you believe Japanese people have a hard time communicating in English? Explain why you think yes or no.

Results

On average, the participants have spent about nine years studying English formally, and about five years and seven months studying English informally. Among the participants, the amount of time they have lived abroad in an English speaking country ranges from three months to 16 years. On average, they have lived abroad for 5½ years.

Table 1

<i>Japanese Participants</i>				
	Gender	Formal Study Time (yrs.)	Informal Study Time (yrs.)	Time Spent Living Abroad (yrs. unless specified)
A	F	6	3	3
B	F	10	16	3 mo.
C	F	7	8	7.
D	F	9	1	1 yr. 9 mo.
E	F	7	2	5
F	M	6	3	6
G	F	7	0	7
H	F	8	1	8
I	M	10	10	2
<i>Korean Participants</i>				
A	F	11	8	5
B	M	20	10	16

All the participants stated that learning English was mandatory in school. Most of them started learning English beginning from 7th grade, but a couple reported they started as early as 4th and 5th grade. In response to the question of when they stopped learning English formally in school, some said after graduating from high school. Others continued on to take English classes at the university level.

In the responses given by the Japanese natives, there appears to be a running theme in their description of what their English schooling was like. They repeatedly mentioned that their lessons focused on grammar and translation. Participant D (Table 1) wrote that typically, her homework would be to translate passages from English to Japanese. Participant E said she would write down sentences from her textbook and look up words she did not understand. Memorizing vocabulary also seems to have been important in their classes. The Japanese participants also emphasized that reading was a main focus in their classes, and whatever they read was from their textbooks. In regards to listening practice, participant A wrote that her class would listen to conversations in English on a tape recorder. Participant I said his teacher would

use CDs to for the class to hear spoken English, and that he “had never heard [the teacher] speaking English.” As for speaking practice, participant B wrote that the only way her class practiced their speaking skills was by memorizing textbook conversations and repeating them aloud. Participant E and F mentioned that there were communication or oral classes, but they were either not very practical or ineffective since it was held only once a week. Just from the nine Japanese native participants’ responses, it is clear that grammar and reading was valued far more in their English classes than speaking. These results are in line with what published literature claim.

The responses given by the Japanese natives to the next question, which was about which area of language was emphasized more, further support what is found in literature. They all said reading and writing were stressed the most. However, participant C and H commented on ESL classes they have taken in America, and that in these classes, speaking was emphasized a lot. Of the four areas of language, all but one of the participants wrote that they were either confident in reading, writing, or listening. Participant H said she is confident in speaking and has taken ESL classes for about two years.

She also said that her speaking and listening skills improved by having an American boyfriend and American friends, as well as an ESL teacher she had at her first language school. Other participants noted that in order to improve their oral and aural skills, they watched American TV shows, movies, and news, listened to English music, and made friends with native speakers. They also credited their ESL classes which were conducted all in English. In response to this question of how they developed their speaking and listening skills, participant I went so far as to write that nothing from middle school and high school helped.

Eight of the nine native Japanese participants answered the last question, six of which responded appropriately in terms of speaking English as a skill. These six responses were all ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Do you believe Japanese people have a hard time communicating in English?’ They gave many reasons to support their opinion. One reason was that Japanese people “do not have many opportunities to communicate in English”, and this is probably due to the fact that the majority of the population of Japan is monolingual Japanese speakers. Another reason mentioned by participant A was that there were English teachers in Japan who did not have much communication skills. The participants also explained how the grammar and translation focus is a factor in why Japanese people have a hard time communicating in English. Participant B wrote that Japan’s English education system “is not made for communicating with other people”, and others similarly stated that there was a lack of time for communication practice. So much time is dedicated to grammar and translation because it seems accuracy is valued over fluency, and also because teachers are teaching to the test, the high school and college entrance exams. Teachers are concerned about translating English into natural Japanese rather than focusing on natural English language usage in conversation. In relation to this, participant E commented that Japanese people find importance in making no mistakes, and by making mistakes in their English usage, they are showing weakness. Participant G wrote that “the idea of ‘native speakers’ English is the best’, which is implanted throughout English classes, somewhat suppresses our willingness to speak out and communicate in English”. This is due to them feeling that their English is inferior to that of the native speaker.

The Korean native participants reported similar experiences of their classes focusing on grammar, reading, and writing. They did a lot of translating and not much speaking and listening. The only speaking activity that participant A reported was memorizing a dialogue and reciting it

in front of the teacher with a partner. They improved their speaking and listening skills outside of their Korean classrooms through private programs or public programs like NICE and HELP at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Conclusion and Implications

The results from this study show that speaking is greatly undervalued in English classes in Japan because of the emphasis on grammar-translation. Like how other studies report, the lack of communicative practice is a reason for the low speaking skills of the Japanese people despite years of education. Teaching to the test, having teachers who cannot even speak much English themselves, and not having real-life opportunities to utilize English all affect the English speaking ability of the Japanese people. What the results of this study show that seems to not be mentioned in literature is that the Japanese value accuracy and the belief that native English is the best English, which affects their speaking. If their English is not 'perfect', then they are much less inclined to speaking English, which counterproductively causes them to not improve.

The English education system is stuck in its ways without much room for change. The endless cycle starts with the stressed importance of entrance exams, which creates negative washback of the teachers teaching to the test. As a result of this, grammar-translation is focused on, and the skill of speaking is undervalued. This paired with the Japanese ideology of accuracy is better than fluency, which makes people less inclined to speak, quite possibly means that for decades to come, unless there is some sort of reform, the majority of Japanese people will not be able to communicate very well in English despite the years of formal study. Although the two Korean participants in the study share similar experiences with the Japanese respondents,

literature states that Korea is actually planning to make changes to their exams by adding a speaking section. Hopefully, Japan will follow suit and potentially break this endless cycle.

Appendix A

Country:

Gender:

Age:

English Education Survey

Instructions: Please answer the following questions with as much detail as you can.

1. A) How many years have you spent studying English formally (i.e. in school)? _____
B) How long have you spent studying English informally (i.e. on your own)? _____
C) How long have you lived abroad in an English-speaking country? _____

2. A) When did you start learning English in school (i.e. grade level)? _____
B) When did you stop learning English in school (i.e. grade level)? _____
C) Was learning English mandatory? _____

3. Describe your English education in school as best you can (i.e. typical lesson, activities, textbook, homework, reading/writing, speaking/listening, etc.).

4. Which area of language was emphasized more in school: reading/writing or speaking/listening? To what extent was each area emphasized? Which area of language are you more confident in? Which do you value more?

5. How did you improve your speaking/listening skills?

6. (For Japanese natives) Do you believe Japanese people have a hard time communicating in English? Explain why you think yes or no.

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